



82.1996.1 Evansville Cotton Mill

Vanderburgh County

Marker Text Review Report

09/06/2013

Text

Evansville Cotton Mill

Several buildings (1874) remain of Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co., 1867-circa 1900. It was a major employer on lower Ohio River. Most workers were women. Accessibility of raw cotton via river, coal from local mines, and railroad transportation attracted mill. Infant food products manufactured here since 1916.

Report

The majority of the marker's claims are correct, but lack proper primary source support to substantiate them. This review will present further primary source evidence to support marker statements and amend incorrect, misleading, or unsubstantiated claims. Additionally, the review will provide context on the textile industry in Indiana and 19th century women textile workers in the United States.

The marker text is correct in stating that several buildings remained of the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Company (or Evansville Cotton Mill). A comparison of plat and survey maps of the property from 1896, 1917, and 1953 reveal that the original mill buildings Nos. 1 and 2 remained standing throughout this period. However, sources submitted by the applicant only provide evidence of the buildings' survival through 1953. Additionally, these remaining buildings were not all built in 1874, as the marker text suggests. According to an 1896 survey map of the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co., only the picker building of Mill no.1 and the engine building no. 1 were built in 1874. The original construction dates of mill building Nos. 1 and 2 are not identified in the maps provided. Further research is needed establish the construction dates of the mill buildings and to prove that these same buildings are still standing today.¹

The founding date of the Evansville Cotton Mill provided in the marker text is also accurate. According to the *Annual Report of the Board of Trade of Evansville Indiana* (1867), the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co. was founded in 1867 with an initial production output of 700 pounds of cotton yarn per day and a staff of 42 mill workers.² However, the estimated closing date provided in the marker text is incorrect. Newspaper articles continued to report on activities at the mill through 1910, and it is possible that the cotton mill closed in late 1910 to early 1911. A January 1911 article in the *English News* reported the failure of two cotton mills in Evansville that year, one in which "Mayor Heilman" of Evansville held an interest.³ *The Blue*



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Book Textile Directory of the United States and Canada identified Chas. F. Heilman as president of Evansville Cotton Mill in 1901, so it is likely that this mill was among those that failed in 1910-11.⁴ Further research is needed to confirm the official year of the mill's closing.

Evansville's position as a transportation hub and source of large coal deposits did attract industry to the area, as the marker text states. In the southwestern region of Indiana, early miners discovered large deposits of cannel and bituminous coal. Between 1850 and 1860 coal production doubled and continued to rise sharply throughout the 1860s. This burgeoning coal industry and the seemingly endless supply of steam power it could provide drew attention to the region as a possible manufacturing center.⁵ Investors in the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Company and other Indiana mills hoped that the inherent advantages of steam power would provide a competitive edge over water-powered mills such as those in Lowell. Theoretically, they reasoned that steam-powered mills would prove superior because steam provided a consistent, year-round power source, while water-powered mills struggled during "winter freezes and summer droughts."⁶ Evansville and the surrounding area also served as a transportation hub on the lower Ohio River. Raw cotton could easily be transported to the region from southern cotton-producing states via the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Additionally, one of the most important railroads in the coal region, completed in 1853, ran through Evansville, Vincennes, and Terre Haute.⁷

The proprietors of the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co. were not the first to recognize the industrial potential of southwestern Indiana. The cotton mill was one of several attempts to build up the textile industry and other manufacturing industries in Indiana in the mid to late 1800s.⁸ In the late 1840s, the Indiana legislature approved twelve charters to establish various manufacturing companies in Perry County along the Ohio River near coal deposits and transportation along the river. However, the only company that successfully developed was the Indiana Cotton Mill in Cannelton. Reportedly the "largest textile factory west of the Alleghenies" at the time, historian Kate Douglas Torrey refers to the mill as the "western steam manufacturing experiment."⁹ Located in a rural area, the Indiana Cotton Mill's proprietors also planned to build an ideal mill town away from corrupting urban influences.¹⁰ However, the "experiment" did not take off as expected in large part due to sediment deposits that clogged the factory boilers, as well as the high price of cotton.¹¹ Efforts to build up manufacturing in southwestern Indiana continued into the 1860s, and the Evansville Cotton Mill was established at the tail end of this push to industrialize.¹² Though less is known about the Evansville Cotton Mill's manufacturing experience, the mill was similar to the Cannelton mill in its use of steam



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power, its countryside location, and strategic location near both coal and adequate transportation systems.

Located in Evansville, Indiana, along the lower Ohio River, the Evansville Cotton Mill did serve as a major employer in this region, as the marker indicates. The city of Evansville was ranked Indiana's third largest employer in manufacturing in the mid to late 19th century.¹³ Within this city, the cotton mill ranked among the top five employers, according to state manufacturing inspection reports for 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, and 1908.¹⁴ Of the hundreds of workers employed by the mill more than half were women, substantiating the marker's claim that "most workers were women." However, the marker does not provide adequate context for this statement. The largely female composition of the workforce was unique for the time period, but not unique within the industry. Few employment opportunities were open to women in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, textile mills throughout the United States traditionally contained high numbers of female workers, and the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co. was no exception.¹⁵ State Department of Inspection reports indicate that typically there was nearly double the number of women workers in the Evansville Cotton Mill than there were men. The mill also hired a small number of children.¹⁶ In her article "Fabricating Independence: Industrial Labor in Antebellum Indiana," historian Anita Ashendel points out that cotton mills in Indiana originally intended the worker base to be mostly female. In the "western steam manufacturing experiment," mill proprietors envisioned an ideal mill community in which men could be "freehold," or property-owning, citizens with their wives and children providing supplemental income through mill work.¹⁷

The marker also fails to address the challenges faced by the mill's workers, especially female operatives and children. Despite the mill proprietors' idealistic visions for a happy, prosperous mill community, low wages, long hours, and hazardous conditions were the norm in many mills including Evansville's cotton mill.¹⁸ While the mill provided employment to many, it was far from secure employment. For example, the mill closed down briefly in 1903 and 1908 due to shortages of raw materials; and each time the mill closed, the proprietors put hundreds of operatives out of work, temporarily depriving them of their living. Wages also fluctuated. One newspaper article in the *Thomas County Cat.* reported a strike by 100 women workers in the weaving department prompted by a sudden 15 percent reduction in wages.¹⁹ Additionally, child workers faced hardships in the mill. For example, in March 1894, the *Rochester Weekly Republican* revealed that John Osborn, manager of the Evansville cotton mill, was fined \$500 for working children under 14 years of age for more than eight hours per day.²⁰



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The marker text's final point that infant products were manufactured in parts of the building since 1916 is also accurate. According to a 1916 advertisement, the Mead Johnson Company moved its operations from Jersey City, New Jersey, to Evansville, Indiana, circa 1916. Mead Johnson was well known for the infant food product, Dextri-Maltose. The company claims to have moved to Evansville to be "nearer the raw materials used in its production and nearer the center of transportation."²¹ Mead Johnson still manufactures infant food products in Evansville today.²² However, more research is needed to confirm that the plant still operates in buildings formerly occupied by the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co.

¹ H.R. Onyx. *Evansville Cotton Mfg. Co.* Scale: 1 inch=60 feet, Survey December 30, 1896, Plan Dept. of the Associated Mutual Insurance Co.'s, Serial Number 448, Index Number 3320, University of Southern Indiana Library, Special Collections; *Plat of Mead-Johnson & Co.*, plat dated January 1917, Mead-Johnson & Co., Evansville, IN, University of Southern Indiana Library, Special Collections; P.K. Enlow, *Mead Johnson & Company, Evansville, Indiana*, May 6, 1953, University of Southern Indiana Library, Special Collections.

² Evansville Journal Company, *Annual Report of the Board of Trade of Evansville, Indiana, for 1867, with a Historical Sketch of the City* (Evansville: Journal Steam Printing Company, 1868), 97.

³ "Gone Democratic," *English News*, January 27, 1911, accessed NewspaperArchive.com.

⁴ *The Blue Book Textile Directory of the United States and Canada* (New York: Davison Publishing Co., 1901), 84.

⁵ Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau & Indiana Historical Society, 1965), 406-407.

⁶ Kate Douglas Torrey, "Visions of a Western Lowell: Cannelton, Indiana, 1847-1851," *Indiana Magazine of History* vol. 73, no. 4 (December 1977): 277-278.

⁷ "Industries of Evansville," Coen & Land, Evansville, Indiana, 1880, Willard Library, 75; Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau & Indiana Historical Society, 1965), 406.

⁸ Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era*, 413.

⁹ Torrey, "Visions of a Western Lowell," 288.

¹⁰ Anita Ashendel, "Fabricating Independence: Industrial Labor in Antebellum Indiana," *Michigan Historical Review* vol. 23, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 5.

¹¹ Torrey, "Visions of a Western Lowell," 279 and 296.

¹² Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era*, 413-415.

¹³ Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau & Indiana Historical Society, 1965), 415.

¹⁴ State of Indiana, *Fifth Annual Report of the Department of Inspection of Manufacturing and Mercantile Establishments, Laundries, Bakeries, Quarries, Printing Offices and Public Buildings*, (Indianapolis: WM.B. Burford, 1901), 43; State of Indiana, *Sixth Annual Report of the Department of Inspection of Manufacturing and Mercantile Establishments, Laundries, Bakeries, Quarries, Printing Offices and Public Buildings*, (Indianapolis: WM.B. Burford, 1902), 47; State of Indiana, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Department of Inspection of Manufacturing and Mercantile Establishments, Laundries, Bakeries, Quarries, Printing Offices and Public*



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¹⁵ Ashendel, "Fabricating Independence," 4; Indiana Labor Commission, *The Second Biennial Report of the Indiana Labor Commission for the Years 1899-1900* (Indianapolis: WM. B Burford, 1901).

¹⁶ For numbers of male, female, and child workers at the Evansville Cotton Manufacturing Co., see sources in Footnote 11.

¹⁷ Ashendel, "Fabricating Independence," 5.

¹⁸ Indiana Labor Commission, *Second Biennial Report*, 115.

¹⁹ "The West," (*Colby, Kansas*) *Thomas County Cat.* vol. 1, no. 22 (Aug. 6, 1885): 1.

²⁰ "Fined for Overworking Children," *Rochester Weekly Republican*, March 29, 1894, p. 1, accessed NewspaperArchive.com.

²¹ "Mead's Dextri-Maltose," Advertisement, *The Bulletin of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland*, vol. 8, no. 11 (1916): 229.

²² See Mead Johnson Nutrition website "Locations," accessed <http://www.meadjohnson.com/Company/Pages/Locations.aspx>.